

GYPSY WOMEN IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CRISIS OR OPPORTUNITY?

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The Spanish gypsy minority is undergoing a crucial moment because of the empowering processes that are being generated and reproduced by gypsy women. These transformations should not be considered accidental since they are the explicit reflection of the changes that the gypsy community has experienced throughout history, and they stand out as an inevitable challenge in this century.

There is no doubt that the Spanish gypsy ethnic minority is undergoing a moment of overtly displayed expectations due to movements within social networks, along with the empowering processes that we gypsy women are generating and reproducing. This process has never been as visible as it is now, and never has it been as simultaneous, synergic and integrating.

Social participation, either in associations, organizations, foundations, institutions, political parties or even religious entities, leads us to consider that this noticeable process, with a clear vocation for continuity and irreversibility, is sufficient to establish a *driving force* to further the processes that are vital for a future survival as a culturally distinct group. The series of transformations that we Spanish gypsy women have undergone should not be considered accidental, since they are the explicit reflection of the changes that the gypsy community has experimented throughout history. These transformations, originating at the core of the structural *identity* that defines gypsies as an ethnic group, entails an enormous diversification among the different territorial subgroups and/or families affected by social class.

The initial idea is that the aforementioned diversity has been useful to discover a different and compatible model to live *gypsyhood* as women committed to our times, to the circumstances surrounding us, and to the fight to give value to our image and identity inside and outside our ethnic group.

But it is not an easy task, nor simple, nor fast to achieve.

BUILDING AWARENESS

The strategies that contribute to the development of our capacities to formulate and defend the way we look at society seem to be directed towards a reinterpretation and modification of cultural and gender norms, traditionally established from an exclusively masculine perspective.

I believe we could now consider the existence of a process whereby a large group of gypsy women are participating in the control of our closer environment and gaining confidence, thus becoming a process that will have a positive effect on problem solutions, on the development of self-sufficiency and on the assumption of *empowerment* as a consensual method for ethnic survival. It is true that questioning gender identity is directly linked to social roles of both men and women. In this sense, some aspects related to gypsy women's expectations can be at odds with the interests of males; from a biased standpoint, they could be *detrimental* for men since they seem to undermine the position of authority they have been traditionally assigned by a right granted from old by the gypsy community itself.

In my opinion, interpreting changes as a collective affront or lack of respect towards the *natural* prestige of gypsy males has quite a coercive meaning. It is some sort of *emotional blackmail* that can still paralyze many women's efforts. Until now, and even to this very day the privileged position of men also grants them disproportionate authority to define predominant values, resource distribution and the exercise of power proper.

Partly because of this, but also thanks to a voluntary decision, we gypsy women have decided to lead a silent fight for an improve quality of life, a *silk revolution* —not a loud one, but a respectful and considerate one—, thus fitting it into a rhythm compatible with *intragroup* relations that are object of a consented and sometimes self-interested exportation to the media, especially in the field of gypsy associationism.

Although the androcentric, endogamus and ethnocentric element is still very present in gypsy cultural discourse, it is being influenced in an exceptional way by the economic and social changes that are taking place in many fields, which is causing a transformation of the relations between men and women that demands a reinterpretation of ethnic expressions.

The most interesting and unique thing of this new-born processes is perhaps that a large majority of us women are being able to revert rather conservative positions in the active political fight, thus forcing, from within the ethnic group, an acceptance of new patterns and

rediscovering territories that exclusively pertained to men before. The tendency towards reformulating relational parameters between gypsy men and women therefore seems a real process, although the change of an androcentric mentality might be slower and the mechanisms to maintain discrimination and control over many gypsy women might still be powerful.

THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT AND THE ASSOCIATIVE MOVEMENT

The first question that arises when some of us approach the word “feminism” is the feeling of unease it provokes. Why does this happen?

The immediate answer is that we rarely find alternatives to the overused explanation that states that feminists “are against men”. The difficulty to find a valid answer is illustrative enough by itself. For the same reason, I think it is worthy to deepen this issue more and analyse some aspects that will help for a better understanding of such an elusive term that is so difficult to deal with from the perspective of gypsy culture. Feminism is impertinent because, as Nuria Varela puts it, “...it is very difficult to prove. Someone says feminism and our interlocutors immediately make a face or become defensive”.

And they are right because feminism has been and is *an agitator* that questions the established order and therefore makes us think and obliges us to take positions for or against it. “About feminism it is always said that it is a new-born that is already dead”, says Amelia Valcárcel. Both questions are false, I think. What really matters is to know that, nowadays, and after so many years of practice, we can no longer talk about feminism but rather feminisms, in the plural, in order to emphasize the different trends arising all over the world.

But the feminist movement is many other things. It is a scarcely hierarchical, non-led movement. And this is one of the aspects most beneficial for us women belonging to specific collectives, as we gypsy women are, because feminism is built up by the *doings* and *thoughts* of millions of women who either group together or remain on their own; nevertheless, they are disseminated all over the world. It is also a political discourse based on justice. From its beginning, feminism has asked relevant questions such as: why are women excluded, why are rights only available to men, where is the origin of this discrimination, what can we do to fight back against it?

If we consider it for a moment, we will realize that similar questions were at some point the guide for the efforts of many gypsy people and entities, and subsequently still are.

Feminism implies some ethics and a way of being in the world because feminist awareness-building inevitably changes the life of each woman and of each man that approaches it.

These few notes on such a reformative theory is my way of saying that, in my view, the most interesting thing we are witnessing today is the reinforcement and redefinition of this movement to make it more inclusive, so that the maxim that “feminism is not the ideology of 100 % of women, rather a philosophy that aims at including 100 % of humanity” will become real.

Because, acknowledged or not, the truth is that the vindications born from gypsy women's associationism are, to a large degree, heirs to the official feminist theory. Since the 1980s, gypsy women gradually stopped being voiced by the associative movement. *Gender awareness within the gypsy collective* was waking up, thus shaking up the public domain of discourse on gypsy identity. This discourse on cultural resistance demanded specificity as a basic premise to start an intercultural dialogue that, in turn, always had a vocation to include, never exclude, the men belonging to this minority. It was the dawn of a *new critical feminist gypsy awareness*, in spite of being an unknown concept, in spite of being rejected in many cases; we were witnesses to the birth of a revolution, a quiet one but a revolution in the end, in terms of how relations between majority and minority should be built, and more importantly between gypsy men and women.

The new form of social participation entailed a necessary reconsideration of roles, statuses and future expectations.

If as women we did not have a world of our own, as gypsy women we demanded to leave our houses and come out to the whole world. Unaware of it, we appropriated Virginia Woolf's idea that “as a woman I have no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world”. In that first “feminist” take-off, the first gypsy women to step onto the public arena vindicated the inclusion of difference in the rights defended by official feminist movements, where a certain hierarchy among women's groups still seemed to have a space.

In this sense, sticking to a minority that had been historically stigmatized did not have an empathetic effect on the other women, but rather the opposite; it meant a certain distance that would lead to disagreement and certain feeling of isolation in our vindications. Maybe this is the explanation for our resistance to accept *oppression as a gender issue*.

Since then until now we have pointed out the need to modify cultural practices that discriminate for ethnic reasons in many fields of our lives, but have built a parallel discourse on equality, compatible with our *gypsyhood*, at a slower and more heterogeneous pace, but still aiming for the same basic objective: a new and fairer model for relations between men and women that allows us to be, at the same time, independent and compromised women.

Yet still, there are many gypsy women's groups that are afraid of being identified with feminism because of its potential negative impact provoked by the assumption that it aims at a superiority of women over men. Their fight for survival and their dependency on their families and communities oblige them to be careful because they fear being excluded and damaged. In this sense, women who raise their voices have been traditionally poorly considered, and this has induced a tendency towards self-marginalization of these base groups still in need of coming to the forefront.

Our awareness campaign as women should strongly target those groups that still are large in number in order to include them in the new model that we established in different times; a model that has been useful for the redefinition of the search for "identity" and "difference" in the current moment that most of us live in, so that both concepts place themselves within a framework where there are no hierarchies, that is accessible and that is exempt of *social fees* from our community. I think this is the moment to outline an "inclusive feminism" that, as it happens regarding other ethnic minorities, will be useful to enrich the feminist movement from a multicultural perspective and to bring it closer to the vindications of our gypsy minority and make it more helpful for the efforts of women in general.

This is already a time to conquer some spaces, mechanisms and laws that will allow us to consider inequality problems between men and women within our own community and in the rest of society. For that reason, women's participation in social networks in the field of the feminist movement can help us support the fight to empower women, without it being a position against men but rather for a fairer model.

It is very important to strengthen women's alliances. There is no doubt that the current moment can be interpreted as a crisis of feminism; because of this, it can also be an opportunity to create a more inclusive movement. We cannot ignore gypsy women's contributions to redefine new development paradigms that are fairer, more egalitarian and sustainable. For the same reason we cannot deny the importance of having women in mixed spaces that are important at all levels. Participation in these spaces must be useful to give

the achievements of the gypsy women's associative movement the value it really deserves as the starting point for our future and for a critical and constructive dialogue with the feminist movement. The way we build the world and how we interiorize it has much to do with the way we build our language.

Because of that, we need to create a new complementary discourse that values our achievements and points out our deficiencies. A discourse dealing with the capacities, the contributions, with everything that we have achieved through all these years, which will allow us to incorporate the concept of personal success and avoid a conflict with the common interests of the group that have always defined us as gypsy women.

Women's alliances demand a step beyond solidarity at the moment, a bonding structure that will allow us to recognize our fellow women and overcome differences. According to this, the authorities are working on the principle of joint responsibility as an essential tenet for the consolidation of the new social model based on work-life balance so that the distribution of duties between men and women will not benefit the former over the latter. It still is an unresolved matter and social conquest, but it is generating efforts and causing discussion in which we gypsy women and men should participate. For that reason, we need to understand existing work dynamics so that we can jointly achieve its consolidation. Along with these processes of change, the emerging gypsy women's leadership is developing as a complex phenomenon that revolves around the concept of influence; that is to say, on the one hand, as the ability to lead others in a desired direction; on the other hand, as the idea of "power" interwoven with gender relations in terms of the capacity of both terms to exercise an absolute influence on social relations.

In conclusion, we need to consider that the similarities between our fight as gypsies and as women are not a coincidence, that our vocation for transformation is not an isolated case, that it is part of larger fight involving all women and that such critical awareness, necessary to *look at* the world, must point out all the tension and contradictions contained in all discourses, both those for which we are involuntarily responsible and those that we voluntarily produce.

This wish for revolution that we gypsy women are pronouncing is a wish for justice, for an improvement of quality of life, for greater access to participation in decision-making spheres. This is the place where the points that we have in common with other feminisms can be useful to us, as well as make us useful for the rest of womankind.

It is not only a theory looking for audacious women, but a practice with the end that everyone, including gypsy men, will get to know and have the courage to acknowledge that gypsy women are free human beings, owners of their own destiny, able to earn their own living and to enjoy their lives according to their freedom of choice, without such freedoms implying a negative social sanction.

Therefore, I am borrowing some words delivered at the Spanish Congress during the reading of the Women's Manifesto of the Instituto de Cultura Gitana in Madrid on February 11th, 2008:

"This is the time to become visible, both outside our culture and in larger society so that we can develop into 21st century women.

This is the time to conquer spaces of power and decision-making in any field or sector we wish.

We gypsy women are prepared because we deserve it, we want it and we can do it.

Today we begin the path that gives us the opportunity to improve the situation of many women who have been silenced for centuries.

Despite the difficulties that challenging the establishment entails, we are convinced that we will manage it.

All of us together. Fearless of liberty".

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